

Weight of Command

by Chuck Kallenbach II

Dhanake-Tilak reclined on the lounge in his quarters. Tactical analyses of the upcoming operation filled one wall of the large sleeping room. "Display home," he thought, and the wall then showed a sweeping estate on Seyal. Covering several square kilometers, his demesne was larger than many. Since nearly the entire surface of Seyal was covered with water, a large estate was a sign of status.

He rested his eyes for a moment, and then looked longingly at the display. Dhanake was a rising member of the Crown class of the Tilak family. A Sathar like himself, a younger Steward, needed to prove his worth through ambitious missions like the one he was leading now. His actual name was Dhanakesatanjapramolhemaivrakakirakesvirathasendabhaviru and like all Shi names, it was a history of his exploits. He wanted it to be longer.

The development of advanced nanotechnology allowed the Shi to live long lifetimes, sometimes hundreds of years or more. The houses of government on Seyal were filled with Vindhar, the older group of Patricians, who had outlived their usefulness. A mass of indolent dilettantes, they spent most of their time dueling each other for sport. Their drive to conquer and explore spent, they filled their long days with futile attempts to kill each other in interesting ways. Even that goal was doomed, since the healers were always present to provide panacea to save them from mortal harm. Failing that, there were the nanites, and if they were too slow, there was cloning. Their life without challenge, without fear of death, became a life without meaning.

That's the way Dhanake assessed the situation. He loved his home, his estate, and close family members, but the Patricians sickened him. Any excuse to leave Seyal and their indulgent boredom was suitable in his estimation.

A telepathic chime announced his adjutant, Sundrav, at the door to his quarters. Shi computers operated using an electronic equivalent to their telepathy, enabling easy communication.

"Enter," thought Dhanake, as he rose to a sitting posture on the zigzag lounge that was typical of Shi living quarters. Dhanake was an imposing figure, tall and broad of shoulder, and he had a commanding presence, even seated.

The door slid open silently and Sundrav glided into the room, bowing to Dhanake as he entered. "We have passed the third planet, sir," he thought to Dhanake. "You requested that you be notified when we were ten hours out." Sundrav was younger than Dhanake, and had been promoted to the Crown class just eleven years ago. Occasionally, a member of the Warrior or Civil class could join the Crown class when sponsored by a current member. Dhanake had sponsored Sundrav when he became impressed by his organizational skills on several exploration missions.

"Very well," thought Dhanake. "Are the quarrels in position?" The standard design of Shi space fighter ships was nicknamed "quarrel."

"Yes sir. The tactical displays are ready for your review on the bridge." This was Sundrav's subtle way of reminding Dhanake that it was time for him to make an appearance on the command deck.

Dhanake rose from his lounge and straightened his short jacket. He floated over to the wall display for a moment, and then thought, "Display off." The wall became blank, adorned only with a silver Tilak family symbol of a single large circle with seven more beneath. He turned to face Sundrav, who was now just by the exit.

"I promise to be impressive, Sundrav," thought Dhanake. He preferred to leave the day to day running of his flagship to his capable crew. Dhanake spent much of his time in his personal quarters, going over the mission plans and studying. Sundrav felt it was part of his job to get his commander onto the bridge to make an appearance at least once a day.

When Shi communicated with other species using their telepathy, only a disembodied voice appeared in the recipient's head. Telepathic conversations between Shi included telempathic feelings, to make up for their lack of physical expressiveness. Nonetheless, Sundrav still had trouble determining when his commander was making a joke.

Dhanake would have preferred to have his quarters much further from the command deck of the *Tilak-Vinisha*, the massive capital vessel that served as his flagship on this mission. The designers of the ship, including the admiral that was his commanding officer, thought that its captain should be close to his bridge.

As Dhanake floated through the doorway, the two Tilak House Guard stationed there moved just behind him, on either side. Their heavy armor and carbines were mostly for show here on the safest part of the massive spaceship.

"Captain on the bridge," announced Sundrav. The *Vinisha* command deck had four levels, each with its own bank of personnel operating controls and peering at displays. All faced the huge holodisplay at the fore end of the chamber. From his elevated position, Dhanake could see them all, but they were never sure when he was looking at them.

"At ease, my crew," notified Dhanake. "Show me the quarrels."

"Aye, sir," replied Nilaba, the executive officer just below him on the first level. The large display showed a view from the rear of his flagship. A dozen quarrels followed in its wake, flying in close formation. Each bore the Tilak family design in its forward view port.

"Fine job, Asanavi." Asanavi was the helmsman of the *Vinisha*, who had piloted the huge craft twenty hours past Earth onward to their destination without detection. Dhanake turned to Nilaba. "Tell Hivanga to close up the starboard flight," he ordered. "I want them all behind us as we approach." Hivanga was the commander of the quarrel squadron sent to support the *Vinisha* on this mission.

The few appearances by Dhanake on the bridge made him distant from his crew, but he had a good memory for names and believed in complimenting the crew when they had done well. "The mission is on schedule. When the quarrels are dispersed, sound battle ready," thought Dhanake to Nilaba.

"Very well, Captain," answered Nilaba. "Stand by for fighter dispersal," he added to the crew.

Dhanake floated slowly across his level of the bridge, surveying the crew below. He thought about the plans that brought him and these other Shi to this place at this moment. They were heading into harm's

way, and he knew that some of them would not make the return trip to Seyal. He felt the weight of command and responsibility of his authority heavily as his mission proceeded like clockwork.

Another Tilak Sathar like Dhanake had proposed the initial mission to this system's second planet called Venus. The planet was barely habitable on its surface, but the Earthers had a sizeable research base on an orbital station. Reportedly, this planet centuries ago had a thick, corrosive atmosphere and tremendously high surface temperature. The Earthers used various technologies to make it more livable, including bombarding the planet with asteroids and erecting screens to block light from the star, thus lowering the planet's temperature.

A standard advanced probe technique employed by the Tilak was to crash land a small, single-crew quarrel on the planet in question. This ship would be equipped with powerful scanners and data recording equipment and an artificial intelligence to control it. Inserting such a craft near a habitation of the indigenous species provided not only physical data but also important data regarding the actions of that species when they encountered the quarrel. Often, as the humans at the Venus base had done, the locals would recover the ship to examine it more fully. Once the ship was taken into a research facility of the target species it began to tap into information networks, collecting and transmitting much more data back to Seyal.

A pilot must be provided on such a ship to avoid suspicion, and the Shi engineered a special organism for that purpose. Using cloning technologies and genetic engineering, a simulacrum that seemed much like a regular Shi was developed with enhanced sensory and memory capabilities. Much like the ship that it occupied, this being was another form of enhanced data recorder. A more complex suite of nanites was also included, to make sure the being would survive the long trip, the crash landing, and whatever experiments the indigenous race would conduct. As an added benefit, this manufactured organism provided little information about actual Shi biology and was impossible to interrogate.

The Sathar that proposed and completed the original Venus mission, named Pridhan, had subsequently fallen into disgrace with the Tilak family. He had failed to put down a rebellion of the Quay subject species and been cast down into the civil class. More rare than ascension like Sundravs, a fall like that of Pridhan was a crushing blow to a Shi, his family, and his close associates.

Looking for a way to establish himself among the thousands of Tilak Crown class nobles, Dhanake worked hard to put himself in command of this mission to retrieve the quarrel from Venus. He saw this as a way to save face for the Tilak family since Pridhan's fall and, more importantly, to make a name for himself at the same time.

"Fighter dispersal on my mark. Now," announced Nilaba, breaking Dhanake's reverie. "Sound battle ready," he added. The main display showed multiple views of the quarrel squadron breaking off from the sensor shadow of the *Vinisha*. One of the comm techs reported, "We have communications from the Earthers. They are scrambling to intercept."

"Send in two flights of quarrels to make sure the *Vinisha* can approach safely," ordered Dhanake.

"Acknowledged," came the response from Hivanga, who was piloting his Squadron Lead quarrel. "Five, bring your flight in on me. Nine, fall back and give us cover." Both pilots acknowledged on the separate squadron comm channel.

Shi quarrels were small spacecraft, hard to detect due to their low electromagnetic signature. This allowed the brazen tactics that Hivanga employed, which were designed to overwhelm species with primitive detection technologies. He was an aggressive, confident commander who had complete contempt for other species.

A complicated plot on the main display showed Dhanake the position of the Earther orbital base, its defending fighters, and his approaching fighter squadron, each identified with vector and speed data. Onboard cameras from the quarrels showed them firing on the Earther defense ships. These were the custom XeLab fighters, common to the Venus garrison.

No other capital ships showed on the sensor screens, and only six Earther ships attempted interception. The circles and triangles danced on the plot display, spiraling together and then apart. Missiles fired by the Earther ships appeared briefly, then winked out. Two of the defenders were gone. One, then another of the Shi quarrels disappeared. Dhanake thought of the six crew represented by those two icons now missing from the display. No more quarrels were lost as they chased down the other four Earther fighters. Two Shi pilots reported heavy damage and were returning to dock with the *Vinisha*.

The opening gambit of Dhanake's plan, a quarrel attack to allow his flagship to approach, was completed with few losses. Any losses were too many, but the score of two fighters lost compared to six enemy destroyed was acceptable.

Dhanake turned and nodded to the two members of his House Guard at the doorway. They nodded in response, and floated away to the exit from the bridge.

Sundrav looked on with disapproval. "Sir, I respectfully request that they remain here to protect you..."

"I face no threat on my flagship's bridge, Sundrav. I appreciate your concern, but my House Guard are elite soldiers and they are wasted guarding me here."

"Of course, sir." Sundrav looked downward and clasped his hands behind his back, looking humbled. They had discussed this before in the mission briefings, and each time had the same result. Part of Sundrav's primary duties were to make sure his captain was safe, and he took his duties seriously.

The next phase of Dhanake's plan involved inserting troops to take control of the orbital research base. Once that was accomplished, recovery of the quarrel and its pilot should be elementary. Reconnoiterers aboard the quarrels of Hivanga's squadron would already be docking with the station. These advance scouts would rapidly infiltrate the facility.

His House Guard gathered with a group of a hundred other veteran soldiers in the launch bay of the *Vinisha*. They boarded shuttles in groups of twenty and began to transfer to the Venus base. Cameras in the bay relayed images of the assembled troops to displays watched by the bridge.

Again, Dhanake thought of the sacrifices that members of the boarding parties would soon be making. Sacrifices that he ordered, in a mission that he designed. He wondered how many would pay for the collection of valuable data and how many would pay for the enhancement of his personal prestige.

Karujay was the leader of the nine Tilak House Guard assigned to protect Dhanake on this mission. House Guards perform duties beyond their ceremonial responsibilities, and leading an assault like the one planned on this mission was familiar to Karujay. He was a veteran of many subjugation operations, and a believer in the direct approach. As a military leader, his views were much like the quarrel commander Hivanga, and both were well suited to this assault mission.

Eavesdropping reconnoiterers onboard the station reported that military presence was minimal. Most of the staff were XeLab scientific personnel. They had already located the command center on the station, and Karujay piloted his shuttle directly for that spot.

Engaging magnetic grapples when the shuttle clanged against the station hull, he shut down the engines and moved toward the airlock. His techs were already cutting with torches, and soon a breach was cut as the piece of plating clanged to the floor inside.

Karujay pointed at two of his guards, peering into their helmets and gesturing down into the hole. They sailed through, heavy carbines at the ready. Karujay heard the carbines fire, and saw green laser fire from the Earthers. Then quiet. "Secure," reported one of the guards.

Two at a time, the others glided through the breach until all nine stood in the corridor of the Earther station. More hand gestures from Karujay and four went each way down the corridor. He stood in between, waiting for a moment.

More gunfire from the first team, and then another report of "Secure." Karujay turned to join the second team at the opposite end. This group had seen no Earthers, and the passage opened into a small storage room. Karujay and his four troopers moved into this room, looking for other exits. Cargo containers blocked their view to the opposite wall.

As they moved forward, a green laser stabbed out from the back right corner, striking one of the Shi square in the back. Karujay saw the laser fire, and he saw it come from nowhere. His three eyes blinked hard as he stared at the empty corner, and another shot caught a second Shi in the arm, coming seemingly from nothing but thin air.

Then, as Karujay gaped, something blinked. A flicker, a shadow of an Earther trooper appeared, and Karujay fired his heavy pistol at the apparition. His shot struck the Earther, and suddenly he was visible. Some kind of concealment technology was definitely at work. "Impressive," thought Karujay to himself, as another of his soldiers fired on the cornered Earther, felling him with a shot to the head.

"Halt your progress," Karujay told his troops, "The enemy may be in concealment. We were ambushed." Then, in communication with the *Vinisha*, he commented, "We need Lifeseekers here. The Earthers are hiding with light bending technology."

Patriarchs of the Shi Crown Class were often the targets of slave rebellions, and had sometimes become captured to be held for ransom. As a result, Shi techs using advanced tracking equipment were used to find

them, and they were called Lifeseekers. These techs had also been employed to find escaped slaves from time to time, ironically enough.

After several minutes, two Shi and a porter bot appeared through the hull breach. Each of the Shi carried a life detector, about the size of a small bowl with a holodisplay of the immediate area above it. The bot carried other detection equipment.

Karujay told them to join the first team and he followed. The Lifeseekers went ahead of the other Shi, and reported, "Clear." Through a heavy doorway, they could see a large room with the captured Shi fighter held there.

"Secure that room, and report back to me when you are done." Karujay then went back to the second team, still waiting in the storeroom. "Only one exit here, sir," reported one of the guards. "Should we wait for the Lifeseekers?"

"No, let's proceed," ordered Karujay. He pressed the door button himself, and looked into the next room. It was a medical facility, and there were no Earthers. . . none that he could see, anyway. Operating on instinct, Karujay entered the room and saw the Shi pilot lying on a large table. The pilot was strapped down with dozens of probes and tubes connected to its body. It had a sickly greenish pallor.

"Remove that equipment and secure the simulacrum," Karujay called to the Lifeseekers. They doubled as med techs, and he wanted an assessment of the pilot's condition.

Shortly, the Lifeseekers arrived and scanned the simulacrum. They nodded. One of them added, "The nanites kept it alive, as expected. We do not know what the walkers have done to it." He put the scanner down and lifted the pilot over his shoulder.

"Pilot secured, quarrel located," reported Karujay to Dhanake.

"Well done, Sergeant. Bring your squad back with the pilot." On the bridge of the *Vinisha*, Dhanake watched data displays as other areas of the station reported minimal resistance. The Earthier light bending equipment allowed them to set up a few effective ambushes, although reportedly that technology was operating only intermittently and probably in its infancy. Dhanake was impressed, nonetheless, and was anxious to report this development to Seyal.

Nilaba relayed that an Earthier named Commander Dalhart, probably the station commander, was attempting to escape on one of the XeLab yachts. In fact, Hivanga reported that four XeLab yachts launched planet side, trying to make it to the surface of Venus. Two of them were destroyed by his resolute quarrels, but the others escaped.

"Should we pursue?" Nilaba looked at his captain, wondering what his response would be.

"Negative," answered Dhanake. He assumed they would have control of the station soon, and they could secure the planet surface at their leisure. Evidently there was some kind of installation on the planet that this Dalhart was escaping to, and that would have to be investigated.

The mission was virtually accomplished, and the rest of the work to be done was in capable hands. "I'll be in my quarters," announced Dhanake to Nilaba. Sundrav looked up, surprised. Dhanake left the bridge.

Once again, he reclined on his lounge. A successful mission, he thought to himself. Two fighters lost with their six crew. . . two killed, and six wounded on the station. A minimal cost, in military terms, but not

to the families of those who lost their lives. He would soon find their names and prepare personal communications to them.

When a Crown dies, the Tilak fail, says the old axiom. That should apply to all Shi, not just the Crown class, thought Dhanake. "Display home," he thought again, and the wall of his quarters showed him his demesne.

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